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Brokaw, Cynthia J., Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods (Book Review)

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goods that the reformers associated with modern economic development, and their removal was considered to be both necessary for commercial expansion and desirable for the purpose of erasing the legacy of a discredited, and hopefully bygone, era.

Capturing much of what must have been a turbulent political process, Carroll demonstrates that with respect to particular developmental or preservation projects various interest groups in the city tended to align themselves in accordance with their self-interests as well as their understanding of the patriotic implications of what they were doing. A common thread that tied together the preservationists and the economists was their desire to build in Suzhou a modern platform for the enhancement of China's national unity and identity. Yet, while the preservationists saw the city's cultural relics as bulwarks of national culture, the economic modernizers subordinated whatever they found of value in Suzhou's cultural heritage to the larger goal of urban reconstruction. There was tension between these two strands of reformist thinking – indeed; Carroll demonstrates that such tensions exist even now (p. 239) – and one of Carroll's more important contributions is to examine the ways by which these tensions played themselves out in a process that yielded various results.

The book is a wonderfully thoughtful piece. Rooted in archival research, employing a wide variety of Chinese and Japanese sources, and informed by contemporary analyses of urban spaces and their impact on culture, it adds greatly to a growing, and fascinating, corpus of scholarship on urban change in China.

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Brokaw, Cynthia J.: *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 280. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), xxv + 673pp., \$44.95. ISBN 978-0-674-02449-6.

This extraordinarily detailed analysis of the commercial publishing industry that was centered in remote areas of western Fujian Province covers virtually all aspects of book production and distribution in the south Chinese hinterland during the Qing and Republican periods. It shows that the use of low-cost technologies, family labor, and lineage-based distribution networks enabled producers to offer a wide range of inexpensive texts that penetrated rural areas far beyond the reach of the more heavily capitalized publishers who operated in the densely populated and culturally advanced centers of north China and Jiangnan. People living even in frontier areas were able to acquire books produced and sold by Fujianese (Hakka) producers, and Brokaw proposes that the result was to enhance China's cultural integration.

Inevitably, the discussion of publishing raises the somewhat contentious issue of literacy in traditional China. Ever since Matteo Ricci noted the widespread circulation of written texts in the sixteenth century, observers have speculated about the breadth and depth of literacy in China; estimates run from a high of 45% to a low of 10% male literacy. Although Brokaw brings to the table a great deal of evidence testifying to the widespread circulation of texts, she tends to side with those who offer a low estimation of popular literacy. On the other hand, her scholarship indicates that the issue is too complex

to make possible a simple calculation of literacy rates based upon the availability of texts. "[T]he Chinese linguistic, educational, and social context," she writes, "simply demands a different approach." (p. 565) This is because there were, after all, people with varying *kinds* as well as degrees of literacy. There was, for example, the "specialized literacy" of the merchant, petty trader, or craftsman, and the even more narrow and fragmentary literacy of the peasant, laborer, or rickshaw coolie who, while having a sight vocabulary sufficient to conduct daily affairs, was far from possessing a "meaningful ability to read." (p. 568) The educational distance between such people and students who had mastered enough of the canon to pass even the lowest-level civil service examination, Brokaw argues, was vast.

To those who are familiar with the imperial examination-based educational tradition and the scholarship that was necessary for success in the exams, this is not a dramatically new finding. What really is interesting, however, is Brokaw's exploration of the extent to which China's "book culture," rather than literacy itself, reached Chinese who either lived in hinterland areas or were lodged on the lower rungs of the Chinese socioeconomic ladder. The homogeneity of types and titles of texts that Brokaw studies, and the diffusion of a "common core" of these texts throughout Chinese society that she documents, are really quite remarkable. And whether local folk owned and read the texts themselves or picked up their contents from story-tellers, literate village ritualists, or other kinds of local experts, one way or another large numbers of Chinese were drawn into contact with a common culture that served as a powerful integrative force.

One of the author's most interesting observations is that the process of integration involved not merely the dissemination of elite values but the spread of ideas that challenged or even satirized elite culture through a wide variety of mainstream but non-canonical texts that included fortune-telling guides, fiction, and songbooks. Integration, Brokaw argues, went two ways: elite and popular culture intersected in a common core of texts to which the vast majority of Chinese had access, either directly through book ownership, or indirectly through book rental and the influence of literate local specialists who were in a position both to interpret elite culture to local folk and to propagate the ideas and values of a subterranean cultural system that did not always neatly coexist with elite values. The common core, it seems, was heterogeneous enough to temper the "homogenizing impact" (p. 559) of texts that were oriented toward the examination-based educational track. The result was a book culture that made space for both elite and popular features of a shared cultural identity.

There is much to admire in this book. Its coverage of the details of book production and distribution and its analysis of texts that were sold throughout south China is a landmark in the historiography of the written word in late imperial/early 20th century China. In the final analysis, however, Brokaw's most important contribution to the field will probably be the insight that she provides into the role that book culture has played in shaping China's cultural identity.

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